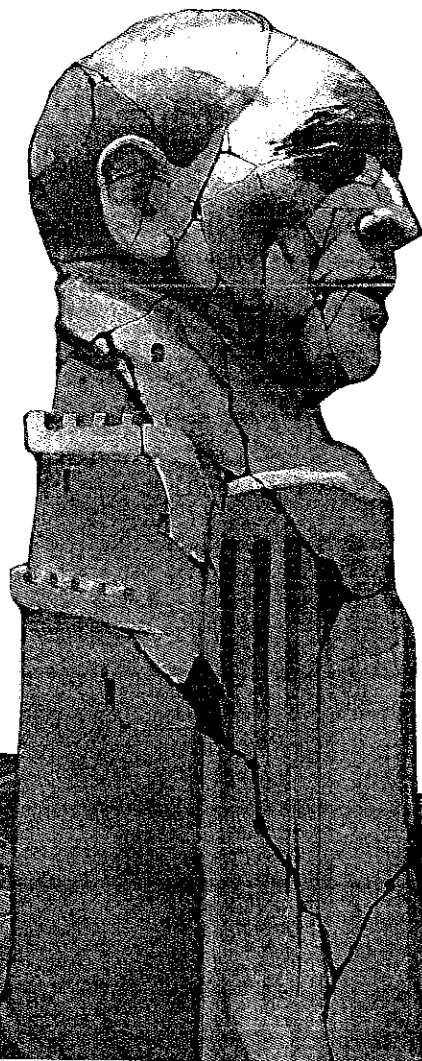


Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

# THE POWER BROKER

*Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*



*by* **ROBERT A. CARO**

# INTRODUCTION

## *Wait Until the Evening*

*One must wait until the evening  
To see how splendid the day has been.*

—SOPHOCLES

AS THE CAPTAIN of the Yale swimming team stood beside the pool, still dripping after his laps, and listened to Bob Moses, the team's second-best freestyler, he didn't know what shocked him more—the suggestion or the fact that it was Moses who was making it.

Ed Richards knew that Moses was brilliant—even "Five A" Johnson, who regularly received the top grade in every course he took each term, said that Moses could have stood first in the Class of 1909 if he hadn't spent so much time reading books that had nothing to do with his assignments—but the quality that had most impressed Richards and the rest of '09 was his idealism. The poems that the olive-skinned, big-eyed Jew from New York wrote for the Yale literary magazines, sitting up late at night, his bedroom door closed against the noise from the horseplay in the dormitory, were about Beauty and Truth. When the bull sessions got around, as they did so often, now that the Class was in its senior year, to the subject of careers, Moses was always talking—quite movingly, too—about dedicating his life to public service, to helping the lower classes. And just the other evening, in the midst of a desultory discussion about which fraternity's nominee should be elected class treasurer, Moses had jumped to his feet and argued so earnestly that class officers should be chosen on merit rather than fraternity affiliation, that the criterion shouldn't be who a man's friends were but what he could do, that Johnson had said to Richards afterwards, "I feel as if I've had an awakening tonight." And now, Richards realized, this same Bob Moses was suggesting that they get money for the swimming team by deliberately misleading Og Reid.

Ogden Mills Reid was the best thing that had ever happened to swimming at Yale. Since the legendary Walter Camp, athletic director as well as football coach, was hoarding the football receipts for a new stadium, there

was no money to replace the dank, low-ceilinged pool, which wasn't even the right length for intercollegiate swimming events. There was no allocation from the university for travel expenses or even for a coach. But Reid, who had been Yale's first great swimmer, not only paid the team's expenses but, week after week, traveled up to New Haven from New York to do the coaching himself. This year, after a long fight, Moses had succeeded in organizing the wrestling, fencing, hockey, basketball and swimming teams into a "Minor Sports Association" which would conduct a general fund-raising effort and divide the money among the teams, in the hope that the existence of such a formal organization would coax new contributions from alumni. The theory was good, Richards had thought at the time, but there was one hitch: any money contributed specifically to one of the teams also had to go into the general fund. Richards doubted that Reid, who was interested only in swimming, would want to contribute to a general fund and he wondered if the swimmers might not end up with even less money than before. But Moses had seemed to have no fears on that score. And now, standing beside the pool, Richards was beginning to understand why. Moses, dressed in suit, vest and a high collar that was wilting in the dampness, had just announced that he was skipping practice to go to New York and see Reid, and when Richards had expressed his doubts that the alumnus would contribute, Moses had smiled and said, "Oh, that's all right. I just won't tell him it's going to an association. He'll think it's the regular contribution to the swimming team."

Now Richards said slowly, "I think that's a little bit tricky, Bob. I think that's a little bit smooth. I don't like that at all."

With astonishing rapidity, the face over the high collar turned pale, almost white. Moses' fists came up for a moment before he lowered them. "Well, you've got nothing to say about it," he said.

"Yes, I do," Richards said. "I'm the captain. I'm responsible. And I'm telling you not to do it."

"Well, I'm going to do it anyway," Moses said.

"If you do," Richards said, "I'll go to Og and tell him that the money isn't going where he thinks it is."

Moses' voice suddenly dropped. His tone was threatening. "If you don't let me do it," he said, "I'm going to resign from the team."

He thought he was bluffing me, Richards would recall later. He thought I wouldn't let him resign. "Well, Bob," Richards said, "your resignation is accepted."

Bob Moses turned and walked out of the pool. He never swam for Yale again.

Forty-five years later, a new mayor of New York was being sworn in at City Hall. Under huge cut-glass chandeliers Robert F. Wagner, Jr., took the oath of office and then, before hundreds of spectators, personally administered the oath, and handed the coveted official appointment blanks, to his top appointees.

But to a handful of the spectators, the real significance of the ceremony

was in an oath not given. When Robert Moses came forward, Wagner swore him in as City Park Commissioner and as City Construction Coordinator—and then, with Moses still waiting expectantly, stopped and beckoned forward the next appointee.

To those spectators, Wagner's gesture signaled triumph. They were representatives of the so-called "Good Government" organizations of the city: the Citizens Union, the City Club, liberal elements of the labor movement. They had long chafed at the power that Moses had held under previous mayors as Park Commissioner, Construction Coordinator and member of the City Planning Commission. They had determined to try to curb his sway under Wagner and they had decided to make the test of strength the Planning Commission membership. This, they had decided after long analysis and debate, was Moses' weak point: As Park Commissioner and Construction Coordinator he proposed public works projects, and the City Charter had surely never intended that an officeholder who proposed projects should sit on the Planning Commission, whose function was to pass on the merits of those projects. For nine weeks, ever since Wagner's election, they had been pressing him not to reappoint Moses to the commission. Although Wagner had told them he agreed fully with their views and had even hinted that, on Inauguration Day, there would be only two jobs waiting for Moses, they had been far from sure that he meant it. But now they realized that Wagner had in fact not given Moses the third oath—and the Planning Commission job. And, looking at Moses, they could see he realized it, too. His face, normally swarthy, was pale with rage.

The more observant among these spectators, however, noticed that after the ceremonies Moses followed Wagner into his inner office. They knew all too well what he would be saying to the new mayor; he had said it often enough, publicly and privately, orally and in writing, to Wagner's predecessors, Vincent R. Impellitteri and William O'Dwyer, and, even earlier, to the great *La Guardia*. "He's threatening to resign," they whispered to one another.

They were right. Behind the closed doors of the inner office, Moses was putting it to Wagner straight: If he didn't get the third post, he would quit the other two. And he'd do it right now.

Wagner tried frantically to stall. The Planning Commission oath? the Mayor said. There must have been an oversight. Some clerk must have forgotten to fill out the appointment blank. Nothing to worry about. He'd see to it in a few days. Moses walked out of the Mayor's office and into the little room down the hall where a deputy mayor and his assistant were filing the appointment blanks. Snatching an unused blank off a sheaf on a table, he sat down at the table and filled it out himself. Then he walked back to Wagner's office and, without a word, laid the paper on the Mayor's desk.

Without a word, the Mayor pulled the paper toward him and signed it.

Robert Moses possessed at the time of his confrontation with Ed Richards an imagination that leaped unhesitatingly at problems insoluble to other men—the problem of financing minor sports had been tormenting Yale

deans for two decades—and that, seemingly in the very moment of the leap, conceived of solutions. He possessed an iron will that put behind his solutions and dreams a determination to let nothing stand in their way—to form the Minor Sports Association he, only an undergraduate, had faced up to, and had finally faced down, Walter Camp, who was implacably opposed to its formation. And he possessed an arrogance which made him conceive himself so indispensable that, in his view, his resignation was the most awful threat he could think of.

Robert Moses possessed the same qualities during his confrontation with Robert Wagner. But by then he also possessed something more. He possessed power.

Power is the backdrop against which both confrontation scenes should be played. For power was the reason for the contrast in their denouements.

The whole life of Robert Moses, in fact, has been a drama of the interplay of power and personality. For a time, standing between it and him was an interceding force, the passionate idealism he had expressed in the Yale bull sessions. Dedicating his life to public service, he remained, during the first years of that service, the idealist of those bull sessions, an idealist possessed, moreover, of a vision of such breadth that he was soon dreaming dreams of public works on a scale that would dwarf any yet built in the cities of America. He wandered tirelessly around New York, and a woman who occasionally wandered with him said he was “burning up with ideas, just burning up with them,” ideas for great highways and parks circling the city’s waterfront and for more modest projects that he thought would also improve the quality of life for the city’s people—little shelters, for instance, in Central Park so that mothers could change their babies’ diapers without having to go all the way home. And when he argued for his ideas before the Good Government organization for which he worked and before the Board of Estimate, he was very careful always to have his facts ready, never to exaggerate them and always to draw from them logical conclusions, for he believed that Truth and Logic would prevail. When he decided to specialize, the area he chose—civil service reorganization—was one based on the same principle with which he had “awakened” “Five A” Johnson, the principle that jobs should be given and promotions based on merit rather than patronage. And he dedicated himself to that principle with the devotion of the acolyte. Brought into the administration of reforming Mayor John Purroy Mitchel in 1914, Moses devised, in a year of unrelenting labor, a system that made every aspect of a city employee’s performance—including facets of his personality—subject to a numerical grade. And for three additional years he fought for adoption of his system, battling a Board of Estimate dominated by one of the most corrupt political machines the United States had ever known, speaking night after night—a tall, very slim, very handsome young man with deep, burning eyes, dressed, often and appropriately, in a white suit, clutching a bulging briefcase and introduced to audiences as “Dr. Moses” in recognition of his Ph.D.—into hails of abuse from furious municipal employees who owed their jobs not to merit but to Tammany Hall, and observers said that the viciousness of the jeering crowds seemed to make no impression on him, so deeply did he believe that if only

they could be made to understand how good his system was, they would surely support it. In those pre-World War I years of optimism, of reform, of idealism, Robert Moses was the optimist of optimists, the reformer of reformers, the idealist of idealists.

So great a nuisance did he make of himself that in 1918 Tammany Hall decided it had to crush him. It did so with efficiency. At the age of thirty, with the grading papers for his system being used as scrap paper, the Central Park shelters and great highways unbuilt, Robert Moses, Phi Beta Kappa at Yale, honors man at Oxford, lover of the Good, the True and the Beautiful, was out of work and, with a wife and two small daughters to support, was standing on a line in the Cleveland, Ohio, City Hall, applying for a minor municipal job—a job which, incidentally, he didn't get.

When the curtain rose on the next act of Moses' life, idealism was gone from the stage. In its place was an understanding that ideas—dreams—were useless without power to transform them into reality. Moses spent the rest of his life amassing power, bringing to the task imagination, iron will and determination. And he was successful. The oath that was administered to Robert Wagner in City Hall on January 1, 1954, should have given Wagner supreme power in New York. That was the theory. In democratic America, supposedly, ultimate power rests in the voters, and the man for whom a majority of them cast their votes is the repository of that power. But Wagner knew better. The spectators may have thought that he had a choice in dealing with Moses. He knew that he did not. Why, when Moses pushed the appointment blank across his desk, did the Mayor say not a word? Possibly because there was nothing to say. Power had spoken.

With his power, for twenty years prior to the day he strode out of City Hall in triumph (and for an additional fourteen years thereafter), Robert Moses shaped a city and its sprawling suburbs—and, to an extent that would have astonished analysts of urban trends had they measured the implications of his decades of handiwork, influenced the destiny of all the cities of twentieth-century America.

The city in which the shaping by his hand is most evident is New York, Titan of cities, colossal synthesis of urban hope and urban despair. It had become a cliché by the mid-twentieth century to say that New York was "ungovernable," and this meant, since the powers of government in the city had largely devolved on its mayor, that no mayor could govern it, could hope to do more than merely stay afloat in the maelstrom that had engulfed the vast metropolis. In such a context, the cliché was valid. No mayor shaped New York; no mayor—not even La Guardia—left upon its roiling surface more than the faintest of lasting imprints.

But Robert Moses shaped New York.

Physically, any map of the city proves it. The very shoreline of metropolis was different before Robert Moses came to power. He rammed bulkheads of steel deep into the muck beneath rivers and harbors and crammed into the space beneath bulkheads and shore immensities of earth and stone,



shale and cement, that hardened into fifteen thousand acres of new land and thus altered the physical boundaries of the city.

Standing out from the map's delicate tracery of gridirons representing streets are heavy lines, lines girdling the city or slashing across its expanses. These lines denote the major roads on which automobiles and trucks move, roads whose very location, moreover, does as much as any single factor to determine where and how a city's people live and work. With a single exception, the East River Drive, Robert Moses built every one of those roads. He built the Major Deegan Expressway, the Van Wyck Expressway, the Sheridan Expressway and the Bruckner Expressway. He built the Gowanus Expressway, the Prospect Expressway, the Whitestone Expressway, the Clearview Expressway and the Throgs Neck Expressway. He built the Cross-Bronx Expressway, the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, the Nassau Expressway, the Staten Island Expressway and the Long Island Expressway. He built the Harlem River Drive and the West Side Highway.

Only one borough of New York City—the Bronx—is on the mainland of the United States, and bridges link the island boroughs that form metropolis. Since 1931, seven such bridges were built, immense structures, some of them anchored by towers as tall as seventy-story buildings, supported by cables made up of enough wire to drop a noose around the earth. Those bridges are the Triborough, the Verrazano, the Throgs Neck, the Marine, the Henry Hudson, the Cross Bay and the Bronx-Whitestone. Robert Moses built every one of those bridges.

Scattered throughout New York stand clusters of tall apartment houses built under urban renewal programs and bearing color, splashed on terraces and finials, that in the twentieth-century American cityscape marks them as luxury dwellings. Alongside some of these clusters stand college lecture halls and dormitories. Alongside one stand five immense dingy white expanses of travertine that are Lincoln Center, the world's famous, costly and imposing cultural center. Alongside another stands the New York Coliseum, the glowering exhibition tower whose name reveals Moses' preoccupation with achieving an immortality like that conferred on the Caesars of Rome (feeling later that he could make the comparison even more exact, he built Shea Stadium, remarking when it was completed, "When the Emperor Titus opened the Colosseum in 80 A.D. he could have felt no happier"). Once the sites of the clusters contained other buildings: factories, stores, tenements that had stood for a century, sturdy, still serviceable apartment houses. Robert Moses decided that these buildings would be torn down and it was Robert Moses who decided that the lecture halls and the dormitories and the cultural center—and new apartment houses—would be erected in their place.

The eastern edge of Manhattan Island, heart of metropolis, was completely altered between 1945 and 1958. Northward from the bulge of Corlears Hook looms a long line of apartment houses devoid of splashes of color, hulking buildings, utilitarian, drab, unadorned, not block after block of them but mile after mile, appearing from across the East River like an endless wall of dull brick against the sky. Almost all of them—ninety-five looming over the river in the first two miles north of Corlears Hook—are public

housing. They—and hundreds of similar structures huddled alongside the expressways or set in rows beside the Rockaway surf—contain 148,000 apartments and 555,000 tenants, a population that is in itself a city bigger than Minneapolis. These buildings were constructed by the New York City Housing Authority, 1,082 of them between 1945 and 1958. Robert Moses was never a member of the Housing Authority and his relationship with it was only hinted at in the press. But between 1945 and 1958 no site for public housing was selected and no brick of a public housing project laid without his approval.

North of the public housing are two immense “private” housing developments: Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village. Moses was the dominant force in their creation, too (as he was in the creation of an even larger “private” housing development in the Bronx, Co-op City). And still further north along the East River stand the buildings of the United Nations headquarters. Moses cleared aside the obstacles to bringing to New York the closest thing to a world capitol the planet possesses, and he supervised its construction.

When Robert Moses began building playgrounds in New York City, there were 119. When he stopped, there were 777. Under his direction, an army of men that at times during the Depression included 84,000 laborers reshaped every park in the city and then filled the parks with zoos and skating rinks, boathouses and tennis houses, bridle paths and golf courses, 288 tennis courts and 673 baseball diamonds. Under his direction, endless convoys of trucks hauled the city’s garbage into its marshes, and the garbage filled the marshes, was covered with earth and lawn, and became more parks. Long strings of barges brought to the city white sand dredged from the ocean floor and the sand was piled on mud flats to create beaches.

And no enumeration of the beaches, parks, apartment houses, bridges, and roads that Robert Moses himself built in New York does more than suggest the immensity of the man’s physical influence upon the city. For the seven years between 1946 and 1953, the seven years of plenty in public construction in the city, seven years marked by the most intensive such construction in its history, no public improvement of any type—not school or sewer, library or pier, hospital or catch basin—was built by any city agency, even those which Robert Moses did not directly control, unless Robert Moses approved its design and location. To clear the land for these improvements, he evicted the city’s people, not thousands of them or tens of thousands but hundreds of thousands, from their homes and tore the homes down. Neighborhoods were obliterated by his edict to make room for new neighborhoods reared at his command.

And his influence upon New York went far beyond the physical. In twentieth-century America, no city’s resources, not even when combined with resources made available by the state and federal governments, came close to meeting its needs. So cities had to pick and choose among these needs, to decide which handful of a thousand desperately necessary projects would actually be built. The establishment of priorities had vast impact on not only the physical but the social fabric of the cities, on the quality



of life their inhabitants led. In New York City, for thirty-four years, Robert Moses played a vital role in establishing the city's priorities. For the crucial seven years, he established *all* its priorities.

Out from the heart of New York, reaching beyond the limits of the city into its vast suburbs and thereby shaping them as well as the city, stretch long ribbons of concrete, closed, unlike the expressways, to trucks and all commercial traffic, and, unlike the expressways, bordered by lawns and trees. These are the parkways. There are 416 miles of them. Robert Moses built every mile. Still within the city limits, stretching northward toward Westchester County, he built the Mosholu Parkway and the Hutchinson River Parkway. In Westchester, he built the Saw Mill River Parkway, the Sprain Brook Parkway and the Cross County Parkway. Stretching eastward toward the counties of Long Island, he built the Grand Central Parkway, the Belt Parkway, the Laurelton Parkway, the Cross Island Parkway, the Interborough Parkway. On Long Island, he built the Northern State Parkway and the Southern State Parkway, the Wantagh Parkway and the Sagtikos, the Sunken Meadow and the Meadowbrook. Some of the Long Island parkways run down to the Island's south shore and then, on causeways built by Robert Moses, across the Great South Bay to Jones Beach, which was a barren, deserted, windswept sand spit when he first happened upon it in 1921 while exploring the bay alone in a small motorboat and which he transformed into what may be the world's greatest oceanfront park and bathing beach. Other Long Island parkways lead to other huge parks and other great bathing beaches. Sunken Meadow. Hither Hills. Montauk. Orient Point. Fire Island. Captree. Bethpage. Wildwood. Belmont Lake. Hempstead Lake. Valley Stream. Heckscher. Robert Moses built these parks and beaches.

The physical works of Robert Moses are not confined to New York and its suburbs. The largest of them are hundreds of miles from the city, stretched along the Niagara Frontier and—in distant reaches of New York State known to natives as “the North Country,” north even of Massena, a town where frost comes in August and the temperature can be thirty below by November—along the St. Lawrence River.

North from Massena the land rolls barren and empty. Only an occasional farmhouse interrupts the expanse of bare fields and scraggly woods. You can drive for twenty miles without passing another car. But turn a bend in the road and there is the St. Lawrence—and, stretched across it, one of the most colossal single works of man, a structure of steel and concrete as tall as a ten-story apartment house, an apartment house as long as eleven football fields, a structure vaster by far than any of the pyramids, or, in terms of bulk, of any six pyramids together, a structure so vast that the thirty-two bright-red turbine generators lined up on its flanks, each of them weighing fourteen tons, are only glistening specks against its dull-gray massiveness. And this structure, a power dam, is only the centerpiece of Robert Moses' design to tame the wild waters of the St. Lawrence, a design that includes three huge

control dams built to force the river through the power dam's turbines. After the dams were built—and the steel forests of transmission towers which distribute the electricity created by water passing through turbines—Robert Moses adorned their bulk with a garland of parks, of campgrounds, picnic areas, overlooks, of beaches built beside lakes that he built, and of miles and miles of more parkways. And at Niagara, Robert Moses built a series of dams, parks and parkways that make the St. Lawrence development look small.

One measure of the career of Robert Moses is longevity. His power was measured in decades. On April 18, 1924, ten years after he had entered government, it was formally handed to him. For forty-four years thereafter—until the day in 1968 when he realized that he had either misunderstood Nelson Rockefeller or had been cheated by him and, in either case, had lost the last of it—he held power, a power so substantial that in the fields in which he chose to exercise it, it was not challenged seriously by any Governor of New York State or, during a thirty-four year period, 1934 to 1968, in which it extended over city as well as state, by any Mayor of New York City. He held this power during the administrations of six Governors—Alfred E. Smith, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Herbert H. Lehman, Thomas E. Dewey and W. Averell Harriman, as well as Rockefeller. He held it during the administrations of five Mayors—Fiorello La Guardia, William O'Dwyer, Vincent Impellitteri, Robert F. Wagner, Jr., and John V. Lindsay. And in 1974, at the age of eighty-five, he was fighting with desperate cunning to get it back.

Another measure of his career is immortality. Men strive for a sliver of it; Robert Moses had it heaped upon him. Not only is there a Robert Moses State Park on Long Island, there is another Robert Moses State Park at Massena. There is a Robert Moses Causeway on Long Island, a Robert Moses Parkway at Niagara. The great dam at Niagara is named for him. And over the entrance to the dam at Massena, in letters of stainless steel each three feet high, gleam the words "Robert Moses Power Dam."

Another measure is in statistics. By the 1960's, expenditures for public works in America were federal-sized, and a federal cabinet officer might have charge of the distribution of billions of dollars. But merely distributing money is not *building*. In terms of true building—personal conception and construction—Robert Moses was unique in America. Without including the cost of schools, hospitals, garbage incinerators, sewers and other improvements whose location and design he approved but which were physically constructed by others, without including the amount of money poured by private sources into construction that also had to be approved by him—including, in fact, only those public works that he personally conceived and completed, from first vision to ribbon cutting—Robert Moses built public works costing, in 1968 dollars, twenty-seven billion dollars. In terms of personal conception and completion, no other public official in the history of the United States built public works costing an amount even close to that figure. In those terms,

Robert Moses was unquestionably America's most prolific physical creator. He was America's greatest builder.

More significant than what Robert Moses built is when he built it. That was how he put his mark on all the cities of America.

When Robert Moses began building state parks and parkways during the 1920's, twenty-nine states didn't have a single state park; six had only one each. Roads uninterrupted by crossings at grade and set off by landscaping were almost nonexistent. Most proposals for parks outside cities were so limited in scope that, even if they had been adopted, they would have been inadequate. The handful of visionaries who dreamed of large parks were utterly unable to translate their dreams into reality. No one in the nation seemed able to conceive of proposals—and methods of implementing them—equal to the scope and complexity of the problem posed by the need of urban masses for countryside parks and a convenient means of getting to them. New York City residents heading for Long Island's green hills and ocean beaches, for example, had to make their way, bumper to bumper, along dusty rutted roads the most modern of which were exactly eighteen feet wide. Those who made it to the Island found that the hills and beaches had been monopolized by the robber barons of America, who had bought up its choicest areas with such thoroughness that there was hardly a meadow or strip of beach within driving distance of New York still open to the public. So fierce was their opposition—and so immense their political power—that New York park enthusiasts had stopped thinking of putting parks on Long Island.

But in 1923, after tramping alone for months over sand spits and almost wild tracts of Long Island woodland, Robert Moses mapped out a system of state parks there that would cover forty thousand acres and would be linked together—and to New York City—by broad parkways. And by 1929, Moses had actually built the system he had dreamed of, hacking it out in a series of merciless vendettas against wealth and wealth's power that became almost a legend—to the public and to public officials and engineers from all over the country who came to Long Island to marvel at his work. When Jones Beach, capstone of the system, opened, it opened to nationwide praise of a unanimity and enthusiasm not to be heard again for a public work until the completion of the Tennessee Valley Authority project a decade later—and the enthusiasm led directly to the creation of scores of state parks in other states, parks built on engineering and philosophic principles that came largely out of the old August Belmont Mansion on Long Island where Robert Moses sat, pounding his palm on what had been Belmont's dinner table and planning out a system far vaster than Long Island's for all New York State. Over the decades, the state park movement developed other leaders, but it was always to be in his debt. And there was never to be any doubt that the breadth of his vision kept him unique within its ranks. At the end of his leadership of the New York system, the total acreage of the state parks in the fifty states was 5,799,957. New York State alone had 2,567,256 of those acres—or 45 percent of all the state parks in the country.

To a few men, young engineers whose passion had been fired by a

dramatic facet of their profession—the construction of highways—the Belmont Mansion was Delphi. They came to it to learn, not just the engineering of great roads, for they could learn engineering elsewhere, but rather a secret available at that time nowhere else: the secret of how to get great roads built. For them, the big table at which Moses sat was an altar on which they laid their dreams in the hope of learning the alchemy by which the dreams might be transmuted into concrete and asphalt and steel. And they were luckier than the Greeks, whose journey to their oracle was over narrow mountain paths. They were able to drive to the mansion on the Southern State Parkway and they could still recall, decades later, their awe at first seeing its stone-faced bridges and opulent landscaping. And when they were admitted to the Belmont dining room, they were not spoken to in riddles but in blunt lectures that contained a whole new doctrine on the building of urban public works in a democratic society. As the young men grew older, they became the road builders of America, the heads of state and city highway departments, key officials of the Federal Bureau of Public Roads, caterers of an orgy of public works without precedent in history. And as the roads they built rolled across America, the mark of Robert Moses was as much a part of those roads as the steel mesh on which their concrete pavement was laid. Bertram D. Tallamy, chief administrative officer of the Interstate Highway System during the 1950's and '60's, says that the principles on which the System was built were principles that Robert Moses taught him in a series of such private lectures in 1926.

Parkways were, in general, laid through thinly populated suburbs or open countryside and were designed to carry only cars. Expressways would be laid—after World War II—through cities, and were designed to carry trucks also, to serve as arteries for the commerce as well as the pleasure of a people. When Robert Moses began building expressways, there were plenty of plans for expressways—but few expressways. Politicians boggled at two political problems that would attend the implementation of the plans: their fantastic cost and the necessity of removing from their path and relocating thousands, even tens of thousands, of voters. For years—decades—in every city in the country, the expressways remained on the drawing boards. In every city, that is, except one. In New York, immediately after World War II, Robert Moses began ramming six great expressways simultaneously through the city's massed apartment houses. A decade later, outside New York, there were still only a few stretches of urban expressway in the United States, but Moses' six pioneer expressways were largely completed. When, in 1956, sufficient funds to gridiron America with expressways were insured by the passage of the Interstate Highway Act, an act in whose drafting Moses played a crucial if hidden role, it was to New York that the engineers of a score of state highway departments came, to learn the secrets of the Master. The greatest secret was how to remove people from the expressways' paths—and Robert Moses taught them his method of dealing with people. This method became one of the trademarks of the building of America's urban highways, a Moses trademark impressed on all urban America. Robert Moses' influence on the development of the expressway system in the United States

was greater than that of any other single individual. He was America's greatest road builder, the most influential single architect of the system over which rolled the wheels of America's cars. And there was, in this fact, an irony. For, except for a few driving lessons he took in 1926, Robert Moses never drove a car in his life.

In 1949, the federal government enacted a new approach to the housing problems of cities: urban renewal. The approach was new both in philosophy—for the first time in America, government was given the right to seize an individual's private property not for its own use but for reassignment to another individual for *his* use and profit—and in scope: a billion dollars was appropriated in 1949 and it was agreed that this was only seed money to prepare the ground for later, greater plantings of cash.

Most cities approached urban renewal with caution. But in New York City, urban renewal was directed by Robert Moses. By 1957, \$133,000,000 of public monies had been expended on urban renewal in all the cities of the United States with the exception of New York; \$267,000,000 had been spent in New York. So far ahead was New York that when scores of huge buildings constructed under its urban renewal program were already erected and occupied, administrators from other cities were still borrowing New York's contract forms to learn how to draw up the initial legal agreements with interested developers. When Moses resigned from his urban renewal directorship in 1960, urban renewal had produced more physical results in New York than in all other American cities combined. Says the federal official in charge of the early years of the program: "Because Robert Moses was so far ahead of anyone else in the country, he had greater influence on urban renewal in the United States—on how the program developed and on how it was received by the public—than any other single person."

Parks, highways, urban renewal—Robert Moses was in and of himself a formative force in all three fields in the United States. He was a seminal thinker, perhaps the single most influential seminal thinker, in developing policies in these fields, and the innovator, perhaps the single most influential innovator, in developing the methods by which these policies were implemented. And since parks, highways and urban renewal, taken together, do so much to shape cities' total environment, how then gauge the impact of this one man on the cities of America? The man who was for thirty years his bitterest critic, Lewis Mumford, says:

*"In the twentieth century, the influence of Robert Moses on the cities of America was greater than that of any other person."*

With his power, Robert Moses built himself an empire.

The capital of this empire was out of public sight—a squat, gray building crouching so unobtrusively below the Randall's Island toll plaza of the Triborough Bridge that most of the motorists who drove through the toll

booths never even knew that the building existed. And most of them were ignorant also of the existence of the empire.

But men whose interest in geography centered on the map of power knew of its existence very well indeed. They realized that although theoretically it was only a creature of the city, it had in fact become an autonomous sovereign state. And, realizing that—although its outward form was a loose confederation of four public authorities, plus the New York City Park Department and the Long Island State Park Commission—it was actually a single-headed, tightly administered monarchy, these men described it with a single name, derived from the bridge and the Authority that were its centerpieces: "Triborough."

Anyone who doubted Triborough's autonomy had only to look at its trappings. The empire had its own flag and great seal, distinctive license plates and a self-contained communications network, an elaborate teletype hookup that linked the gray building and the provincial capitals at Belmont Lake, Massena and Niagara. It even had its own island—Randall's—on which it administered every structure and every inch of land. Randall's Island was near the geographic center of New York, but the waters of the East River, Bronx Kill and Hell Gate were a moat between it and the city, and from the air, with its hundreds of acres of lawn, the island appeared separate, a bright green oasis, sharply defined by a blue border, in the midst of the city's vast grayness. And the separateness was more than symbolic: no inhabitant of the city could drive across the island without paying Triborough a tribute in coin.

Triborough had its own fleets, of yachts and motorcars and trucks, and its own uniformed army—"Bridge and Tunnel Officers" who guarded its toll booths, revolver-carrying Long Island Parkway Police who patrolled its suburban parks and roads—responsible to no discipline but that of Robert Moses. To command the army, under Moses, it had its own generals and admirals, senior officers of the United States Army and Navy who, upon retirement, took service under its banner. It had its own constitution: the covenants, unalterable by city, state or federal government, of its bond resolutions. It governed by its own laws: the Rules and Regulations that it promulgated to regulate conduct within its dominions. And, most significantly, it had its own source of revenue: the quarters and dimes that poured in a silver stream into the toll booths at which it collected tribute.

It was a vast empire. In 1960, the year of its furthest expansion, the land area under its direct control—the parks of Long Island and New York City, the highways and highway-bordering playgrounds in the city and the enclaves in which are placed the upstate power dams—totaled 103,071 acres, 161 square miles, an area half as large as New York City. But the best measure of the size of the empire was its wealth; its annual income—the toll-booth revenue, the fees it received for the use of electricity produced at Massena and Niagara, the yearly budgets of the Long Island State Park Commission and the City Park Department—ran as high as \$213,000,000; the surplus of just one of its four constituent public authorities, the Tri-



borough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, ran to almost \$30,000,000 a year.

The courtiers and courtesans of this empire wallowed in an almost Carthaginian luxury. Favored secretaries, for example, had not only bigger cars than city commissioners (as well as round-the-clock chauffeurs so that they could be on call twenty-four hours a day) but also higher salaries. As for the men closest to the throne, the cadre of Triborough administrators known as "Moses Men," not even his most suspicious critics ever came close to guessing the extent of the wealth he poured into their hands. He made not a handful but scores of men—a low-salaried draftsman who caught his eye, a struggling young hot-dog seller, architects, engineers, contractors, bankers, restaurateurs, concessionaires, developers—millionaires and multimillionaires.

Within this empire, Robert Moses lived like an emperor.

Like an emperor, his every wish was foreseen. On Sundays, when he rested, one of the three boat captains who took turns skippering his favorite yacht waited by a telephone, sometimes for the entire day, just in case he might decide that he wanted to go fishing. Like an emperor, he preferred his own table; people who wanted to dine with Moses had to come to him. And to insure that he could entertain them on an imperial scale, luxurious dining rooms were set up adjacent to the four offices—one at Randall's Island, one at Belmont Mansion and two in downtown office buildings—among which he divided his time. Although only one of them could be used at a time, each of them was equipped with a full-time staff of chef and waiters.

Luncheons were only one aspect of his hospitality. When a dam or park was to be opened upstate, chartered planes flew hundreds of guests not just to the opening but to a whole weekend of lavish receptions. In New York, highly paid Triborough officials had as their principal duty the entertainment of Moses' guests. They conducted tours of the empire, pointing out its principal natural features—the towers of the Triborough Bridge, marching like the façades of twin cathedrals across the East River, the long lawns of Riverside Park—and repeating, at each monument, the legends, burnished by time and constant retelling, of how Robert Moses had created it. And the thousands of guests at the summer capital of the empire, Jones Beach, were entertained—in a million-and-a-half-dollar restaurant whose main purpose, judging from its financial statements, was to entertain them; in a four-million-dollar stadium that he had turned over to his favorite bandleader, Guy Lombardo, virtually as a gift on which Lombardo reaped immense personal profits, so that Lombardo's orchestra would be constantly on call—on a scale and with a sumptuousness that was as close as anyone in America ever got to the entertainment afforded by a monarch.

The wealth of the empire enabled Moses to keep many city officials in fear. With it, he hired skilled investigators he called "bloodhounds" who were kept busy filling dossiers. Every city official knew about those dossiers, and they knew what use Moses was capable of making of them—since the empire's wealth allowed him to create an awesomely efficient public relations machinery. They had seen him dredge up the dark secrets of men's pasts and turn them into blaring headlines. On the occasion of Paul Screvane's appointment as city representative to Moses' 1964-65 World's Fair, Mayor Wagner said to

him: "Paul, my experience with Moses has taught me one lesson, and I'll tell it to you. I would never let him do anything for me in any way, shape or form. I'd never ask him—or *permit* him—to do anything of a personal nature for me because—and I've seen it time and time again—a day will come when Bob will reach back in his file and throw this in your face, quietly if that will make you go along with him, publicly otherwise. And if he has to, he will destroy you with it."

There were men whose past contained not even a speck of grist for Moses' mill. This, however, was no guarantee against attack. Perhaps their fathers had committed an impropriety. If so, Moses would visit the sins of the fathers on the children. A respected financier, rising in a City Planning Commission hearing to oppose a zoning change sponsored by Moses, was astounded to hear Moses reply by reading into the hearing transcript newspaper accounts of a scandal, unconnected in any way with zoning, in which the financier's father had been involved—forty years before, when the financier was eight years old.

And if Moses possessed no derogatory information at all about an opponent or his forebears, this was still no guarantee against attack. For Moses was an innovator in fields other than public works. He practiced McCarthyism long before there was a McCarthy. He drove Rexford G. Tugwell out of his City Planning Commission chairmanship—out of New York, in fact—helped drive Stanley F. Isaacs out of his borough presidency and destroyed the public careers of a dozen other officials by publicly, and falsely, identifying them as "Pinkos" or "Planning Reds" or "followers of the Ogpu," the Soviet secret police. There were two widespread Communist witchhunts in New York City, one in 1938 and one in 1958. Both relied heavily on "information"—much of it innuendo or outright falsehood—leaked to newspapers by Moses.

The fear in which Moses was held because of these factors was intensified by his memory. Cross him once, politicians said, and he would never forget. And if he ever got the chance for revenge, no consideration would dilute his venom. For a twenty-year period that did not end until 1968, Moses was given by the State Department of Public Works a secret veto power over the awarding of all state contracts for public works in the New York metropolitan area. No engineer who had ever forcefully and openly disagreed with a Moses opinion ever received even one of the thousands of contracts involved.

Moses was able to shape a city and to build an empire because the supple mind that had conceived of a Minor Sports Association for Yale and innovations in the civil service system for New York City—and also of substantial portions of the New York State Constitution—had focused on the possibilities of an institution still in its infancy as an urban force when he came to it in 1934: the public authority. He raised this institution to a maturity in which it became the force through which he shaped New York and its suburbs in the image he personally conceived.

Operating through an authority, Moses could keep the public from finding out what he was doing, and this was an important consideration with him. If, throughout his half century and more in the public eye, he displayed an eagerness and a flair for publicizing certain aspects of his career and his life, he displayed an equal eagerness and flair for making sure that only those aspects—and no others—were known. There were, for example, men and women who knew Robert Moses for half a century who never knew that he had a brother, or that in the city in which Robert Moses lived in luxury, that brother spent the last thirty years of his life in a poverty so severe that he lived in a fifth-floor walkup flat in an old tenement huddled against the piers of South Ferry.

The official records of most public agencies are public records, but not those of public authorities, since courts have held that they may be regarded as the records of private corporations, closed to scrutiny by the interested citizen or reporter.

This was very important to Robert Moses. It was very important to him that no one be able to find out how it was that he was able to build.

Because what Robert Moses built on was a lie.

The lie had to do with the nature both of the man and of the public authority. Moses said that he was the antithesis of the politician. He never let political considerations influence any aspect of his projects—not the location of a highway or housing project nor the award of a contract or an insurance commission, he said. He would never compromise, he said. He never had and he never would. That, he said, was the way politicians got things done, but he was no politician. He knew what should be done and he intended to do it the right way or not at all. He said this at the beginning of his career and he said it at the end; in 1961, at the trial of a borough president who had received favors from an urban renewal contractor, Moses, on the witness stand, was asked whether the contract had not been awarded as part of a "deal." Moses' face paled with rage. "In forty years of public life," he said, "I have never made a deal."

Public authorities are also outside and above politics, Moses said. Their decisions are made solely on the basis of the public welfare, he said. They have all the best features of private enterprise. They are businesslike—prudent, efficient, economical. And they are more. They are the very epitome of prudence, efficiency, economy. And they have another advantage over conventional governmental institutions as well. Since they finance their projects through the sale of revenue bonds to private investors, they therefore build these projects without using any public funds. Projects built by authorities, he said, cost the taxpayers nothing.

These statements were believed implicitly for almost forty years by the public to which they were made. And this is not surprising. For Robert Moses repeated his contentions a thousand times and for four decades they were repeated, amplified and embellished by a press that believed them, too.

Because of the forty years of adulation of the newspapers—and of the public that read the newspapers—for forty years nothing could stand in Moses' way. No Mayor or Governor dared to try to breast the wave of public

opinion in whose curl Moses rode. One President tried. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the most bitter enemy that Moses ever made in public life, attempted as President to exact vengeance for humiliations previously received at Moses' hands. But although he made his move at the very zenith of his own popularity and prestige, the President found himself forced to retreat by a storm of acclaim for Moses that rolled not only through New York but across the country and that, ironically, left Moses embedded more firmly than ever in the public consciousness as the fearless defier of politicians. For forty years, in every fight, Robert Moses could count on having on his side the weight of public opinion.

The beliefs on which that opinion was based were never disproved or even seriously questioned, not even during the final, bitter decade of Moses' career, a decade during which his policies were subjected to steadily increasing criticism. For even during that decade, the criticism was of Moses' projects more than of the methods by which he accomplished those projects. The reason for this was simple. The vast majority of the public accepted the legend as fact. And even those skeptics who were disposed to test its truth had no facts with which to make the test, because the records of Triborough and the mouths of its ministers were so effectively sealed. If, however, they had been able to see the records and open the mouths, they would have learned that the legend was a gigantic hoax.

Prudent, efficient, economical? So incredibly wasteful was Moses of the money he tolled from the public in quarters and dimes that on a single bridge alone he paid \$40,000,000 more in interest than he had to. Authority projects cost the taxpayers nothing? Covert "loans" made to authorities by the state—loans designed never to be repaid—ran into the hundreds of millions of dollars. The cost of city-purchased land on which authority facilities were built ran into the hundreds of millions. The cost of taxpayer-financed toll roads leading to authority facilities ran into the billions. And the loss in tax revenue because authority-controlled land was removed from the tax rolls drained the city year after year.

Most important, had the records of the authorities been open, they would have disproved another aspect of the lie: the legend that Robert Moses was no "politician," that he operated at a higher level than that implied in the derogatory connotations attached to that noun, that he managed to create his public works at a remove from politics. Actually, as these records prove, Robert Moses' authorities were a political machine oiled by the lubricant of political machines: money. Their wealth enabled Moses to make himself not only a political boss but a boss who in his particular bailiwick—public works—was able to exert a power that few political bosses in the more conventional mold ever attain.

Even had the records been available, of course, the public might not have understood their significance. For Moses was a political boss with a difference. He was not the stereotype with which Americans were familiar. His constituency was not the public but some of the most powerful men in the city and state, and he kept these men in line by doling out to them, as Tammany ward bosses once handed out turkeys to the poor at Thanksgiving,

the goodies in which such men were interested, the sugar plums of public relations retainers, insurance commissions and legal fees. This man, personally honest in matters of money, became the locus of corruption in New York City. Robert Moses made himself the ward boss of the inner circle, the bankroller of the Four Hundred of politics. Far from being above the seamier aspects of politics, he was—for decades—the central figure about whom revolved much of the back-stage maneuvering of New York City politics. Triborough's public relations retainers ran to a quarter of a million dollars a year, its legal fees to a quarter million, its insurance commissions to half a million—a total of a million dollars a year. Moses parceled out retainers, fees and commissions to city and state political leaders on the basis of a very exact appraisal of their place in the political pecking order. And an examination of the records of the recipients leads to the conclusion that, year after year, it was the men who received Moses' turkey baskets who fought against any diminution in Moses' power—and for whatever public works project he was pushing at the moment.

Beyond graft and patronage, moreover, Moses also displayed a genius for using the wealth of his public authorities to unite behind his aims banks, labor unions, contractors, bond underwriters, insurance firms, the great retail stores, real estate manipulators—all the forces which enjoy immense behind-the-scenes political influence in New York. He succeeded in mobilizing behind his banner economic forces with sufficient weight to bend to his aims the apparatus so carefully established in City Charter and State Constitution to insure that, in deciding on such projects, the decisive voice would be that of the people. He used economic power for political ends—so successfully that in the fields he carved out for his own, fields in which decisions would shape the city's future for generations if not for centuries, he made economic, not democratic, forces the forces that counted in New York. And because he spoke for such forces, it was his voice that counted most of all.

"He gave everybody involved in the political setup in this city whatever it was that they wanted," one official recalls. "Therefore they all had their own interest in seeing him succeed. The pressure that this interest all added up to was a pressure that no one in the system could stand up against, because it came from the system itself." And since the mayor's power and career rested on this system, he was as helpless to stand against the pressure Moses could exert as was anyone else. When Robert Moses walked into Wagner's office on that Inauguration Day in City Hall and shoved the appointment blank across Wagner's desk, Wagner had no choice but to sign it. Given the circumstances of the Democratic Party in New York City, he *couldn't* let Robert Moses resign. What Moses had succeeded in doing, really, was to replace graft with benefits that could be derived with legality from a public works project. He had succeeded in centralizing in his projects—and to a remarkable extent in his own person—all those forces which are not in theory supposed to, but which in practice do, play a decisive role in political decisions.

Corruption before Moses had been unorganized, based on a multitude of selfish, private ends. Moses' genius for organizing it and focusing it at a central source gave it a new force, a force so powerful that it bent the entire

city government off the democratic bias. He had used the power of money to undermine the democratic processes of the largest city in the world, to plan and build its parks, bridges, highways and housing projects on the basis of his whim alone.

In the beginning—and for decades of his career—the power Robert Moses amassed was the servant of his dreams, amassed for their sake, so that his gigantic city-shaping visions could become reality. But power is not an instrument that its possessor can use with impunity. It is a drug that creates in the user a need for larger and larger dosages. And Moses was a user. At first, for a decade or more after his first sip of real power in 1924, he continued to seek it only for the sake of his dreams. But little by little there came a change. Slowly but inexorably, he began to seek power for its own sake. More and more, the criterion by which Moses selected which city-shaping public works would be built came to be not the needs of the city's people, but the increment of power a project could give him. Increasingly, the projects became not ends but means—the means of obtaining more and more power.

As the idealism faded and disappeared, its handmaidens drifted away. The principles of the Good Government reform movement which Moses had once espoused became principles to be ignored. The brilliance that had invented a civil service system was applied to the task of circumventing civil service requirements. The insistence on truth and logic was replaced by a sophistry that twisted every fact to conclusions not merely preconceived but preconceived decades earlier.

Robert Moses was America's greatest builder. He was the shaper of the greatest city in the New World.

But what did he build? What was the shape into which he pounded the city?

To build his highways, Moses threw out of their homes 250,000 persons—more people than lived in Albany or Chattanooga, or in Spokane, Tacoma, Duluth, Akron, Baton Rouge, Mobile, Nashville or Sacramento. He tore out the hearts of a score of neighborhoods, communities the size of small cities themselves, communities that had been lively, friendly places to live, the vital parts of the city that made New York a home to its people.

By building his highways, Moses flooded the city with cars. By systematically starving the subways and the suburban commuter railroads, he swelled that flood to city-destroying dimensions. By making sure that the vast suburbs, rural and empty when he came to power, were filled on a sprawling, low-density development pattern relying primarily on roads instead of mass transportation, he insured that that flood would continue for generations if not centuries, that the New York metropolitan area would be—perhaps forever—an area in which transportation—getting from one place to another—would be an irritating, life-consuming concern for its 14,000,000 residents.

For highways, Moses dispossessed 250,000 persons. For his other



projects—Lincoln Center, the United Nations, the Fordham, Pratt and Long Island University campuses, a dozen mammoth urban renewal projects—he dispossessed tens of thousands more; there are available no accurate figures on the total number of people evicted from their homes for all Robert Moses public works, but the figure is almost certainly close to half a million; the one detailed study by an outside agency shows that in a ten-year period, 1946 to 1956, the number was 320,000. More significant even than the number of the dispossessed were their characteristics: a disproportionate share of them were black, Puerto Rican—and poor. He evicted tens of thousands of poor, nonwhite persons for urban renewal projects, and the housing he built to replace the housing he tore down was, to an overwhelming extent, not housing for the poor, but for the rich. The dispossessed, barred from many areas of the city by their color and their poverty, had no place to go but into the already overcrowded slums—or into “soft” borderline areas that then became slums, so that his “slum clearance programs” created new slums as fast as they were clearing the old.

When he built housing for poor people, he built housing bleak, sterile, cheap—expressive of patronizing condescension in every line. And he built it in locations that contributed to the ghettoization of the city, dividing up the city by color and income. And by skewing city expenditures toward revenue-producing services, he prevented the city from reaching out toward its poor and assimilating them, and teaching them how to live in such housing—and the very people for whom he built it reacted with rage and bitterness and ignorance, and defaced it.

He built parks and playgrounds with a lavish hand, but they were parks and playgrounds for the rich and the comfortable. Recreational facilities for the poor he doled out like a miser.

For decades, to advance his own purposes, he systematically defeated every attempt to create the master plan that might have enabled the city to develop on a rational, logical, unified pattern—defeated it until, when it was finally adopted, it was too late for it to do much good.

*“One must wait until the evening . . .”* In the evening of Robert Moses’ forty-four years of power, New York, so bright with promise forty-four years before, was a city in chaos and despair. His highways and bridges and tunnels were awesome—taken as a whole the most awesome urban improvement in the history of mankind—but no aspect of those highways and bridges and tunnels was as awesome as the congestion on them. He had built more housing than any public official in history, but the city was starved for housing, more starved, if possible, than when he had started building, and the people who lived in that housing hated it—hated it, James Baldwin could write, “almost as much as the policemen, and this is saying a great deal.” He had built great monuments and great parks, but people were afraid to travel to or walk around them.

For all these reasons, this book attempts to tell two stories at once: how New York, forty years ago a very different city from the city it is today, became

what it has become; and how the idealistic Robert Moses became what he has become. It must try to be a book about what happened to the city and what happened to the man. For, to an extent few people have really understood, these two stories are one story. Would New York have been a better place to live if Robert Moses had never built anything? Would it have been a better city if the man who shaped it had never lived? Any critic who says so ignores the fact that both before and after Robert Moses—both under “reform” mayors such as John Purroy Mitchel and John V. Lindsay and under Tammany mayors such as Red Mike Hylan and Jimmy Walker—the city was utterly unable to meet the needs of its people in areas requiring physical construction. Robert Moses may have bent the democratic processes of the city to his own ends to build public works; left to themselves, these processes proved unequal to the building required. The problem of constructing large-scale public works in a crowded urban setting, where such works impinge on the lives of or displace thousands of voters, is one which democracy has not yet solved.

Moses himself, who feels his works will make him immortal, believes he will be justified by history, that his works will endure and be blessed by generations not yet born. Perhaps he is right. It is impossible to say that New York would have been a better city if Robert Moses had never lived.

It is possible to say only that it would have been a different city.